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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the rudiments of a constructivist conceptual framework which school psychologists can use to help parents develop positive parenting concepts. Problems arise if school psychologists rely solely on a mechanistic paradigm when they identify causes of unwanted behaviors and suggest specific remedial strategies. Operating within a constructivist framework, which assumes several cognitive processes such as anticipation, accommodation and assimilation in the child and sees parents as moderators of discrepancy or novelty and regulators of arousal, a sensitive parent (1) understands the child's characteristic ways of construing events, (2) presents the child with sensory input that is moderately discrepant from the child's existing cognitive organizations, and (3) provides the child with support in his efforts at accommodating his cognitive organizations to assimilate novel input. Parents can be taught to sensitively present an orderly world to their children. Experience in a parent training program based on constructivist principles of psychological functioning suggests the following hypotheses: parents who rely on coercive strategies to promote compliance operate on the basis of evaluatively negative, unidimensional constructions of the motives for their children's activities; parents who rely on persuasion and reasoning to promote compliance operate on the basis of less evaluative, integrated, multivalent constructions of the motives for their children's behavior. (Author/RH)

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A Constructivist Framework for Helping Parents Develop Positive Parenting Concepts

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A Constructivist Framework for Helping Parents Develop Positive Parenting Concepts

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Abstract

Although numerous perspectives on child-rearing and parenting have been promoted, parents still remain perplexed about handling their children. It is argued that many of these perspectives are not based on any comprehensive theory of psychological functioning and that they encourage consideration of isolated pieces of behavior as opposed to promoting a view of the child developing epigenetically as a total problem solver. An alternative perspective based on a constructivist theory of psychological functioning is offered. The parent is conceptualized as a "novelty moderator" who regulates the child's arousal by presenting input of varying discrepancy from the child's cognitive organizations. A parent training program based on this framework is evaluated. A number of hypotheses are raised concerning the possible relations between parents' skills at construing their children's perspectives and the strategies they employ in regulating their children's behavior.

A Constructivist Framework for Helping Parents Develop

Positive Parenting Concepts

Statement of the Nature of the Issues

Given the multitude of perspectives on child-rearing which have been promoted in the popular literature in recent years, it is not surprising that many parents feel perplexed about handling their children. School psychologists who consult with parents on issues of their children's behavior regulation frequently encounter this confusion. As school psychologists are generally credited with expertise in child-rearing matters, they are often expected to provide parents and teachers with effective behavioral management strategies. The purpose of this paper is to present the rudiments of one more conceptual framework which could be applied by the school psychologist who is involved in helping parents develop positive parenting concepts. The discussion will be organized as follows: First, we shall affirm the ubiquity of theory in implicitly guiding the school psychologist's efforts at assisting parents to regulate their children's behavior and facilitate their children's development. Secondly, we shall present some of the basic propositions of a constructivist framework for viewing the parent-child relationship. We shall also report some research which supports the validity of these propositions. Finally, we shall discuss some of the implications which we believe our framework might have for helping parents develop workable parenting concepts.

The Ubiquity of Theory as an Implicit Guide to Practice

School psychologists are expected to be well versed in the research literature and to be able to translate research findings into practice. Consequently, it is no surprise that school psychologists frequently subscribe to one or another kind of reinforcement theory as they consider interventions. A major share of the childrearing and behavior management literature has been dominated by mechanistic paradigms (Forehard, Sturgis, McMahon, Aguar, Green, Wells, &

Breiner, 1979; Goocher, 1975; Meichenbaum & Goodman, 1971; Parke, 1974; Patterson, Neal, Hawkins & Phelps, 1967; Wahler, 1969; Walters & Grusec, 1977). Additionally, another factor seems relevant in accounting for the school psychologist's ready acceptance of mechanistic principles. Functioning within the consultant role, the school psychologist is presented with referrals which introduce complaints about isolated bits and pieces of behavior. The psychologist is often induced to offer advice about single events, and can easily overlook the child who functions within a variety of contexts. In effect, the school psychologist is often expected to uproot the "causes" of particular unwanted behaviors, and, correlatively, to suggest specific remedial strategies for replacing these unacceptable behaviors with acceptable behaviors. Given this context of professional operations, it is very seductive for the psychologist to adopt mechanistic metaphors. Cause and effect, after all, are the touchstone of mechanistic principles (Rychlak, 1968, 1973) and cause-effect relationships do make sense when we analyze the isolated event. However, there are serious problems facing the school psychologist who attempts to operate solely within a mechanistic paradigm.

As we all know from our own personal experience, adults who are involved in long-term relationships with children seldom base their child-care decisions exclusively in terms of the manipulation of rewards for compliance and punishment for non-compliance. Parents do not respond to isolated bits and pieces of their children's behavior. They respond to their children on the basis of how they cognitively structure their children's observed behavior (Bacon & Ashmore, 1979) and organize their belief systems about children in general, and about optimal socialization strategies (Mancuso, 1979; Mancuso & Handin, 1980; McGillicuddy-DeLisi, Sigel, & Johnson, 1979; Newberger, 1980).

In the following section we shall present the rudiments of a constructivist framework for interpreting the parent-child relationship, along with some empirically validating research. Then, we shall elaborate on the implications that could follow if members of our profession seriously considered exploring a constructivist paradigm for helping parents in their efforts at regulating their children's behavior.

A Constructivist View of the Parent-Child Relationship

Assumptions About the Nature of Cognitive Development

Following the leads of Piaget's theory (Piaget, 1967, 1969, 1970, 1977), cognitive development is represented as a progressive construction, on the part of growing children, of structures for organizing their perceptions of the world. Development is seen as motivated by the child's continual efforts at maintaining his adaptation by confirming the validity of the cognitive organizations he applies in assimilating events. From this perspective, events which are moderately incongruous from the child's existing cognitive organizations, are seen to present the child with evidence that his cognitions are no longer valid. These invalidations are seen as stimulating the child to accommodate his cognitions in order to resolve the incongruities. The child's accommodating processes involve a reorganization of existing cognitive structures to reduce the discrepancy between these structures and the incongruous input. The resulting reorganizations are then available for integrating future events that are perceived to have similar attributes.

In explicating the assumptions that would underly a constructivist motivational model, Mancuso (1977) stated:

> As the person goes through his life, he is perpetually engaged in a monitoring process whereby all stimulus input is checked against

existing structure. Where there occurs a discrepancy between input and existing structure - "expectations" - the input to the disrupted channel is shifted to the central processor. This stimulus occupies "attention" until the incongruity is resolved - either through a recheck that shows that there can be, indeed, a stimulus/construction match, or through a change in structure. These periods of "problem solving" are accompanied by physiological arousal, and when the incongruity has been resolved there is "habituation", marked by a diminution of the physiological activation (p. 65).

The Parent as a Novelty Moderator

In his discussion, Mancuso conceptualized the parent as a "novelty moderator" relative to the child's psychological development. In adopting this conceptualization of the parent role, we recognize that, among other things: (1) the parent arranges the child's environment by presenting seonsory input that varies in its incongruity from the child's cognitive organizations, and; (2) the parent observes and attempts to regulate the child's arousal reactions to novel input. From this perspective, the mother is seen to become the focus of the child's attachment in so far as she has "successfully" enacted her role as a novelty moderator. "Success" would be evidenced if, "when in the moderator's presence, the child functions from an anticipation that he will achieve success in working with new construct-expanding information (Mancuso, 1977, p. 76).

At this point, it is of heuristic value to draw upon Kelly's (1955) fundamental postulate in his elaboration of a personal construct psychology. "A person's processes are psychologically channelized by the ways in which he anticipates events" (p. 46). The implications of this principle are direct-

Parents' behaviors with respect to their children are "channelized" by how parents construe their children. Clearly, parents vary in their understandings of their children's construct systems and consequently in how successfully they moderate their children's arousal (Bacon & Ashmore, 1979; Hanes & Dunn, 1978; Mancuso, 1979; Mancuso & Handin, 1980; McGillicuddy-DiLisi, Sigel, & Johnson, 1979; Newberger, 1980).

The Dimension of Sensitivity-Insensitivity

We can evaluate parents' competence in regulating their children's arousal by evoking the dimension of sensitivity-insensitivity (Ainsworth & Bell, 1969; Beckwith, 1972; Clark-Stewart, 1973; Gordon, 1974; Hanes & Dunn, 1978; Martin, 1975; Schaffer & Emerson, 1964). Following a constructivist framework, we shall offer the following propositions in order to distinguish between sensitive and insensitive parenting. A sensitive parent (1) understands the child's characteristic ways of construing events; (2) presents the child with sensory input that is moderately discrepant from the child's existing cognitive organizations; and (3) provides the child with support in his efforts at accommodating his cognitive organizations to assimilate novel input. An insensitive parent: (1) generally does not understand how the child construes events; (2) consequently, the parent presents the child with input that is either too discrepant or not at all discrepant from his existing cognitive organization, and; (3) does not provide the child with support in his efforts at accommodation.

In terms of this conceptualization of parental sensitivity, we need to note the following points: (1) Sensory input that offers too much discrepancy from the child's existing cognitive organizations, could very likely be experienced by the child as threatening, if he attempts to integrate it. This is because the child would need to make too many major changes in his cognitive apparatus

to assimilate the input; (2) Contrarily, sensory input that does not offer enough discrepancy is very likely to be experienced by the child as boring. The role of the sensitive parent, then, once she has presented the child with moderately discrepant input, is to deliver enough support in aiding the child in his efforts at accommodating the input. Clearly, a parent cannot always accurately anticipate how her child will construe a particular stimulus event. In any case, the parent needs to anticipate the child's arousal reactions, in order to try and help the child maintain his arousal at an optimal level.

The following two excerpts are drawn from Gordon (1975), who, although he does not talk in these terms, presents cogent examples of sensitive and insensitive mothering of an infant.

> Insensitive mothering: Jimmy stands up in his crib and begins to whimper, then to cry loudly. Mother sets him back down and hands him a rattle. Jimmy stops crying for a moment, then knocks down the rattle out of the crib and onto the floor, and begins to cry even more loudly. Mother picks up the rattle and firmly puts it into Jimmy's hand, saying harshly, "If you throw it out again, you won't get it back." Jimmy keeps crying and again knocks the rattle out of the crib. Mother slaps his hand. Jimmy really howls now. (p. 99)
>
> Sensitive mothering: The parent might first throw a blanket over the child ... But the child keeps on crying ... Then the parent picks the child up and rocks him ... the child continues to cry ... Finally, the parent puts a bottle of milk in the infant's mouth ... and after a few sucks the child stops crying. (p. 98)

In the first example, the mother did not understand her infant's

anticipations. She handed him a rattle. It seems clear that, for the infant, the rattle did not provide an optimal level of stimulation. He responded by getting rid of the rattle. At this point the mother did not try to see the child's position, but instead re-presented the same input. Again, the infant pointed out the mismatch between his expectations and the input. He rejected the input by ejecting the rattle. This time the mother attempted to apply coercion. It was as if she was saying; if you do not accept this input, then you will never be re-presented with input like it in the future! This probably presented the infant with an even harder-to-integrate incongruity. The infant continued to reflect his arousal by crying, and re-ejecting the rattle from the crib.

In the second example, the mother at first did not understand the infant's anticipations. She realized this from her observation that the infant continued to cry after her initial attempt at comforting him by providing him with a blanket. At this point, she decided that handling the child might help to lower his level of arousal. The child continued to reflect his excessive arousal, so, she tried feeding. This did result in a match between the input and the infant's anticipations. Furthermore, the rocking of the infant while he was feeding, probably provided him with other, easily integrated stimulation.

Some Relevant Research Related to the Construct of Maternal Sensitivity

There has been a whole line of research studies which provides support for the proposition that maternal responsivity and sensitivity to the child have major implications for the child's social and cognitive development (Ainsworth & Bell, 1969; Martin, 1975; Schaffer & Emerson, 1964; Stayton, Hogan, & Ainsworth, 1971). In one study, Stayton, Hogan, and Ainsworth (1971) reported that the earliest manifestations of infants' compliance with their mothers'

directives appeared to be most significantly related to the mothers' responsiveness to their infants' signals. The frequency of the mothers' verbal commands and physical interventions were found to be negatively related to the infant variables of internalized controls and compliance to commands. In another study reported by Lytton and Zwirner (1975), maternal consistency of rule enforcement, amount of play with the child, and the use of positive validation and reasoning were found to be the most important predictors of child compliance. Physical control and negative actions such as threats and coercion were found to be particularly facilitative of both non-compliance and further efforts at parental control.

Given the assumption that children develop schemata of their parents' utility in helping them resolve discrepancy, then we can infer that children's following of their parents' directives would be affected by the nature of these schemata. Possibly, then, parents of "hard-to-regulate" children have not succeeded in establishing themselves as problem-solving resources in their children's perceptions. Such a theoretical position is quite different from holding that response-contingent reinforcement increases the probability of compliance and response-contingent punishment decreases the probability of responding.

From a constructivist position, reprimand is a contextual affair, the outcomes being firmly rooted in the nature of the relationship between the reprimander and the rule-violator. Parents who are consistently successful at inducing their children to follow rules are probably viewed by their children in positive ways. We are currently investigating children's conceptions of the purposes, styles, and outcomes of parental reprimand and our data will be reported in future papers. At this point, the details are reported by Eimer (1980).

In a study conducted as part of an evaluation of their parent training program, Mancuso and Handin (1980) collected data on parents' views about relationships between child-rearing beliefs and various parenting roles. Participants in this study were nine parents who had completed fifteen parent training sessions, and seven parents who had not yet participated in the training program. All the parents had come to the program for assistance in handling their hard-to-regulate children.

Parents responded to a parent role repertory instrument which required that they evaluate the sensibility of 16 statements about child-rearing and parent-child relationships. Parents were asked to evaluate these statements from their own standpoints, as well as in terms of how they would predict parents fitting various other role-descriptions would evaluate these statements. For example, a responding parent was asked to think of how "a father of a fifth grade child who breaks more rules than anybody in the fifth grade" (p. 13) might react to each of the 16 child-rearing statements. In all, they were asked to evaluate these child-rearing statements from the perspectives of 14 different role positions. The final result of each of the parent responses was a 16 x 14 data matrix, such that each cell of a parent's matrix contained a numerical score representing an evaluation of a particular child-rearing statement from the standpoint of a particular role position. These data matrices were statistically analyzed using a hierarchical clustering algorithm designed by Rosenberg and his research group (Rosenberg, 1977).

All of the parents who had not participated in the program produced matrices that seemed to reflect the view that it was best to leave children alone except when children did not follow their directives. This view was supported by the belief that to regulate means to be coercive. Furthermore,

they did not seem to believe it to be important to attend to the child's perspectives. Of the parents who had participated in the program, four of the nine produced matrices which seemed to reflect their view that it is certainly important to get along well with one's children. This view was supported by the belief that to "regulate" means to arrange the environment so there would be input that the child could easily handle. Furthermore, they did affirm the importance of attending to the child's perspectives. Additionally, they perceived restrictive, coercive strategies to be associated with children who do not function well.

Implications of a Constructivist Framework for Helping Parents Develop Workable Parenting Concepts

There continues to be a large number of publications each year aimed at teaching parents more workable and effective parenting skills. Some representatives of these are Ginott's humanistic approach (Ginott, 1965), Gordon's parent effectiveness training (Gordon, 1975), and the democratic logical consequences approach of Dreikers (1958). What these different approaches have in common is that they attempt to teach parents specific skills in more effectively relating with their children without using power-based and coercive strategies. They also have in common the fact that they espouse specific strategies based upon principles which are limited to specific psychological domains, such as cognition or affect. For example, Thomas Gordon (1975), who is heavily influenced by Rogerian psychology, concentrates largely on teaching parents techniques of resolving conflicts with their children so that feelings remain positive on both sides. His techniques rest largely on the strategy of reflecting to the child what the parents think he is feeling, in order to induce the child to talk more about his feelings. According to

Gordon, the goal in such conflict situations is to first decide who "owns the problem" and then to deliver messages which accurately communicate this. Hopefully, then, by acknowledging each person's feelings about the situation, parent and child can openly work out a solution to the problem, which satisfies both of their needs.

Drawing upon Kelly's (1955) fundamental postulate again, "a person's processes are psychologically channelized by the ways in which he anticipates events" (p. 46), we assert that the most reasonable way of approaching parent-training is to refine parents' skills in anticipating their children's perspectives and to teach parents alternative ways of construing their relationships with their children. We believe that the conceptualization of the parent as a "novelty moderator" is of enough generality to have rich implications for explaining all aspects of the parent-child relationship. The principles of moderate discrepancy and arousal regulation are based on a comprehensive theory of psychological functioning (Mancuso, 1977). A firm grasp of these principles should enable parents to generate varied predictions about their children which can then be put to the active behavioral test.

Parents need to be taught the importance of presenting an orderly world to their children. What is orderly, from the child's perspective, is what is moderately discrepant from the child's existing cognitive organizations. Thus, parents need to be taught how to attend to their children's perspectives. But, more importantly, parents need to be led to accept the importance of attending to their children's perspectives. Too often people learn useful skills but, for one reason or another, fail to apply them.

We believe that constructivist principles of psychological functioning, child development, and parenting can be presented to most parents in terms they

can assimilate. At Saint Catherine's Center for Children in Albany, New York, the second author, in collaboration with Kenneth Handin as the project's director, have organized and implemented a parent training program based on these principles. The program uses videotapes as a tool for helping parents watch themselves interacting with their children. First, with a therapist present, the parent watches a videotape of her child interacting with the therapist who engages the child in an age-appropriate activity. The therapist comments on the interaction and offers interpretations of the rationale for various behavioral management techniques on the basis of a consideration of the child's ongoing psychological processing. The parent's interaction with her child is then videotaped. Finally, the therapist and the parent sit down and talk about how the parent interacted with her child in terms of the moderate discrepancy principle and the arousal monitoring principle. It is pointed out to the parent, when she is using coercion, and when she is not attending to the child's perspective. Alternative techniques for regulating the child's behavior are presented. Also, comparisons are drawn between the behaviors of the parent and therapist in terms of how they interact with the child.

On the basis of the data collected within this parent training program so far, a number of hypotheses can be framed:

Hypothesis 1. Parents who rely on coercive strategies to promote compliance operate on the basis of evaluatively negative, unidimensional constructions of the motives for their children's activities. It is highly probable that coercive parents frequently construe their children's motives in this way immediately preceding their coercive efforts. For example, most of the parents who participated in the St. Catherine's Training Program were, at first, unable to generate positive constructions of their children's activities in their

interactions with them. Constructions such as "lazy" and "hyper" are representative of the kinds of negative interpretations they commonly applied.

Hypothesis 2. Parents who rely on persuasion and reasoning to promote compliance operate on the basis of less evaluative, integrated, multivalent constructions of the motives for their children's behavior. Such persuasive parents probably see no need to apply coercion as they are skillful at attending to their children's perspectives. They see their children as operating to maintain the validity of their own existing cognitive organizations. Four of the nine parents who had participated in 15 sessions of the training program positively endorsed constructions such as: letting children think for themselves; letting children indicate disagreement with parents; letting children learn things by working them out in their own way; and presenting children with orderliness and structure. Apparently, these parents had learned to acknowledge the central place of their children's cognitions in guiding their behavior.

A number of studies are currently being planned to empirically test these hypotheses.

In summary, the major goal of our constructivist approach to working with parents is to convince them of the utility of attending to their children's perspectives. The constructivist parent-training program currently underway aims at helping parents develop more refined skills for such construing. Parent participants are led, through examples, to respond to their children's behavior as representing their children's attempts to resolve discrepancy and regulate their own arousal. Parents are helped to construct a view of their children as active cognizers who are always trying to maintain the validity of their cognitions.

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